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Fruffeltin

by

Jared Ratzel

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Fine Arts in Film and Animation

School of Film and Animation

College of Art and Design

Rochester Institute of Technology

Rochester, NY

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Abstract:

Fruffeltin is a short 2D animated film following the journey of a goofy children's book character trying to win back the affection of a child after being replaced by a fighting video game. The film's core message regarding mental health awareness is illuminated through the visualization of character-driven animation, juxtaposing environments and symbolic details. The concept stems from my own personal growth trajectory and reflection upon it within the framework of animated creatures and robots.

The narrative follows Fruffeltin, a children's book character with three leaves on his head, who lives to make a young boy laugh by performing silly tricks. When the young boy's attention is drawn to a video game instead, Fruffeltin sets out on a mission to regain his attention within the futuristic video game world. Out of his element, Fruffeltin finds himself struggling to perform his usual tricks and is further hindered by the older brother, who uses his game robot to interfere in the process. Fruffeltin has to determine whether to stay in this world and win back the boy's attention in the face of these mounting obstacles.

I. Introduction:

With *Fruffeltin* I wanted to make a film based on a period of my life with which I am still coming to terms with. I struggled, and still do at times, with excessive people-pleasing and forcing myself to be more extroverted than I really am. Looking back at this time doesn't mean that everything is resolved now, I consider myself a continuous work in progress. But, after I was able to cope better with some of those behaviors, I felt compelled to reflect on them. The film was established with three goals in mind, the first being to thematically include the genre of fantasy while also touching upon something personal. Since I knew that fantasy enticed me from an early age, I needed it to shape the personal narrative. The second goal was to focus on character animation, which encouraged me to strengthen my skills and create a character that is believable, both in movement as well as in personality. Lastly, the third goal was telling a meaningful story in a short amount of time. In general, I lean towards emotionally driven work and have learned that such work doesn't have to be told solely through a feature-film or television episode format. A short film is capable of holding emotional weight and creating a lasting impact on the audience. As a whole, the filmmaking process allowed for full immersion into an imaginative world that felt symbolic to me. The film's core message regarding mental health awareness is illuminated through the visualization of character-driven animation, juxtaposing environments and symbolic details. These representations come into fruition with the guidance of the protagonist's actions: his mannerisms and choices when dealing with obstacles inform the viewer of his mental dilemma. Furthermore, transitioning between worlds allows for visual shifts in his mental state - the environment either challenges him or allows him to come to terms with a new facet of his mental health. Objects used by the protagonist, such as the bag of

tricks, enables his behaviors when motivated by anxiety, but becomes a force of connectivity when used to reestablish a friendship. Lastly, the leaves on the protagonist's head represent an overarching character transformation, signifying a loss of identity in the midst of chaos.

II. Review of Literature:

After listening to Jay Shetty's podcast *On Purpose*, I felt compelled to understand myself better. This podcast is about being honest with yourself and forming new habits in your life to improve your emotional and physical well-being. Jay Shetty is a former monk whose ambition has been creating a healthy lifestyle and maintaining a sense of spiritual purpose in this busy modern world. His messages about inner-self work sent me on my own personal growth trajectory, one not linear in its nature but more like a winding complicated path. My discovery of the podcast and the accompanying curiosity towards my own mental health began a year before production of my thesis film, but it led me to choose the subject matter in *Fruffeltin* regarding loss and discovery of oneself. Once the concept came to me, I knew that the production process would help me with two aspects; it would prepare me for the animation industry by fully immersing me in the animation pipeline, and it would serve as a creative outlet to process a facet of my mental health journey.

As *On Purpose* helped me gain the confidence needed to delve into telling a mental health related story, my curiosity propelled me further towards other podcasts that were tailored even more specifically to what I was coming to terms with. I will label this all as personal mental health exploration since I am not a mental health professional but I have experienced a lot of lightbulb moments while listening to OCD/Anxiety podcasts. The need to force myself to smile

and act positive in an almost unnatural way relates to performing compulsions to avoid uncomfortable thoughts and feelings. I didn't link it to OCD until March, when my film was far into production and I was approaching the finish line, but these realizations have framed the story for me in a more meaningful and honest light. I depict the character of Fruffeltin as a performer, seeking the validation of someone else through his goofy tricks. The idea of a performer pleasing others relates back to how I was coping with the discomfort. Instead of letting myself experience uncomfortable feelings and allowing my mind to be imperfect, I was focused on creating a version of myself that I thought would appear perfect to me and others. My idea of perfection entailed appearing joyful and extroverted towards everyone, without ever showing any sign of unhappiness or having an opinion that might offend someone else. And if I broke this in any way, I would feel immense shame and spiral because I wasn't living up to my standards.

In *The OCD & Anxiety Podcast*, the host Robert James Pizey talks about a way of managing symptoms that I wasn't able to grasp during the height of these behaviors:

My favorite way of practicing acceptance is generally through postponement. The thought in that moment is likely very urgent, the OCD wants you to solve it immediately, but we don't have to do what the OCD wants. We can make a conscious decision to postpone thinking about it for a specific amount of time. (Pizey 10:21)

Pizey continues to encourage one to set designated times during the day to return to the obsession for further reflection, in hopes of creating a better way of dealing with these thoughts throughout the day. He concludes by saying, "The idea is that you aren't immediately doing what the OCD wants, you're making a decision to deal with the discomfort until a future time and therefore you are giving yourself the opportunity to learn to accept that feeling in the body. And

the more we are able to move towards that feeling, the less the intrusive thoughts are going to bother us” (Pizey 11:22). Pizey points out an essential aspect in the recovery journey, which entails actually becoming aware of what you are feeling, and letting your thoughts flow as they are meant to.

The way I portray Fruffeltin up until his final breaking point goes against this logic, since he uses his obsessive need for outside validation to obscure his own wants and needs. What continues to drive Fruffeltin forward is the cycle he is stuck in, which author John Green further touches upon when describing his own OCD:

The O comes first for a reason, like one thought floats in like a snowflake and then you are looking at the snowflake and then you are like *well I don't want that to happen*, and then suddenly it's a blizzard and there's nothing but the snowflakes and you have no ability to choose your thoughts, no ability to control the worry, and it can really overtake me and hijack my consciousness. And then if there is a compulsive behavior that works, I'll do it because (I'll do anything) to stop having to feel terrified. So you get into these loops where you use these compulsive behaviors to manage obsessive worry and then overtime those compulsive behaviors take up more of your life. (Green 24:59)

Fruffeltin's actions from the beginning up until his last leaf falling resemble a cycle: Every time he is knocked down, he gets back up, using a forced extroverted persona to perform his next trick. It's losing his last leaf at the hand of the one person he thinks he needs approval of that jolts him. Adjacent to my experience, all the pretending had completely muddled my sense of self. I reached a point where trying to please everyone was tiresome and frankly impossible.

Other people's behaviors and reactions made me aware that what I was doing was pointless - trying to control everything under a false pretense was the opposite of connecting with others.

The correlation between OCD/anxiety to *Fruffeltin* is not made obvious to the viewer when watching the film. Using allegorical imagery to tell the story allowed me to explore this personal aspect of my journey when I still didn't quite know how to label it. I knew from the beginning that I wanted to tell a story about a character with excessive people-pleasing habits who in the process loses themselves, and I knew it was closely related to anxiety. Perhaps if I had a better understanding of OCD earlier, I would have tried to incorporate certain characteristics or actions to make it more specific, but the general story I think would have still stayed the same.

When tackling the depiction of characters with mental health struggles it is important to consider that, as an article from *Mental Health Europe* points out, "A movie or series should emphasize their (the character's) disability is only a part of their multifaceted character" ("7 Tips"). I wanted to accomplish this with the resolution of the film. Fruffeltin's whole stint in the video game world doesn't define him: he rekindles a friendship even after harming them through past behaviors and finds a sense of purpose after losing Timothy's approval. I depict him as calmer and inward seeking when he re-enters the children's book, showing that he isn't bound to be the extroverted performer he first was introduced as. The article continues to state: "People do recover from mental health problems and learn to manage their mental health condition in their daily life" ("7 Tips"). The ending is left open in a way, with only one leaf growing back and his actions beyond the little concert remaining uncertain. Will he be tempted to entertain the next child that opens the book? Could he find a way to make the child happy by just being himself? Like any life journey, a mental health one does not have one solution or destination. Instead it

becomes more about managing your struggles in a healthy way. Therefore the little concert in the end is supposed to give an inclination that Fruffeltin can find a healthy way to deal with his struggles.

Portraying an element of fantasy in the film was just as important to me as telling a mental health story. As a kid I found great creative freedom and satisfaction in exploring my imagination. The worlds I used to build and the characters I let come to life in my mind have stuck with me, inspiring me to recreate some of the magic I used to feel as a child. My childhood friends and I labeled ourselves as a secret club with connections to other worlds, and we would have countless adventures in the woods accompanied by our so-called magical companions. Since this was such a strong facet of my childhood, it has influenced my art simultaneously, leading me to design various naturistic and quirky creatures over the years. Fruffeltin, with his leafy head and round features would have fit right into one of those worlds we created. The name of Fruffeltin was inspired by the Dr. Seuss ABC book, specifically the character under the letter F, “Four Fluffy feathers on a Fiffer-Feffer-Feff” (Seuss 16). Something about the sound of it amused me as a young child and has stuck with me. Although *Fruffeltin* can be easy to mispronounce, once it came to me I couldn’t un-see it for this character. Another likeness I drew between the two characters was the flowing head ornament, with the Dr. Seuss character sporting extravagant feathers and Fruffeltin showing off his bouncy green leaves.

Fruffeltin was influenced by storytelling with a deeper meaning, as seen in the 2D animated film *Boy and the World*. This film models a children’s book aesthetically and portrays characters in a simplistic design that still allows for vast emotional expression. It speaks to me further because of its central focus on growing up and getting to know the world around you. Ale Abreu, the filmmaker, shares a reflection that parallels my thinking process during production: “I

think the greatest challenge in a film is not to lose, during the long and hard years of production and all the mishaps along the way, that initial motivation that gave us energy to begin the film in the first place” (“Filmmaker Interview”). I was well aware of the time-consuming nature and almost robotic feel of the filmmaking process. What helped me keep my initial motivation alive was setting up a narrative centered on Fruffeltin’s developing emotional state, giving me the chance to ask myself during each scene: “What is he feeling right now? Why is he performing this action?” It gave the character a more well-rounded and purposeful presence, and it made the feelings I was trying to convey in him tangible. Abreu continues further: “Especially with *Boy*, the greatest challenge was to stay close to the boy’s vision. I need to allow myself to be guided by the character I had created, letting his personality be projected onto the decisions I made (“Filmmaker Interview”).” The only way I felt like I was conveying a story of mental health successfully through allegorical storytelling was by determining Fruffeltin’s true desire throughout: to be accepted for who he was by himself and by those he cares about. This drives his antics as a performer, even if motivated by fear, and then later turns into self-awareness when the little concert takes priority over the video game.

The creature characters in my short film, Fruffeltin himself and his friend Daffodil, relate to my favorite depiction of fantasy, one related to nature. Although simple in their design, both of these characters are supposed to be creatures of nature, with Daffodil resembling a fruit sprouting a flower from his head and Fruffeltin embodying earthy colors with three leaves replicating a voluminous hairstyle. This connection to fantasy and nature was closely felt when playing with my childhood friends in the woods. It was further solidified after watching Studio Ghibli films, especially Miyazaki's 2001 film *Spirited Away*. This highly masterful feature length-film not only implanted my own desire to animate into my mind, but further confirmed

the strength in visual storytelling when fantasy and nature intertwine. An article on *Spirited Away* details:

Everything in the natural world has a spirit - frogs, birds, even radishes - and they all come here (the bathhouse) to be cleansed. Miyasaki also discusses his concern for the environment again. At one point, the bathhouse is tormented by a 'stink spirit'. Chihiro (the protagonist) is forced to serve the customer, but she discovers her inner bravery and cleanses it. The foul creature turns out to be a river spirit that has been corrupted by pollution. Chihiro pulls out mounds of garbage from the spirit, and it flies away happy, clean and pure. Once again, man has corrupted nature, turning a supernatural creature into a type of demon. (Newell)

Miyasaki's representations of supernatural beings emphasize the significance for respecting nature and recognizing how it connects to us as human beings. This kind of storytelling that acknowledges nature's value at its core inspired me to have the three leaves on Fruffeltin's head symbolize aspects of his identity. I like how Miyasaki's symbolism situated in nature and fantasy makes use of environmental commentary, so with *Fruffeltin* I was aiming to utilize it for my choice on social commentary based on mental health. The leaves don't represent specific traits; instead, they serve as more of an abstract indication that they have been a discernible part of him. In allegorical terms this could refer to his values: since he is betraying his values, he is losing his leaves.

Additionally, I was prompted to think about nature's role towards the end of the film and decided to have it resemble a peaceful gateway, aiding Fruffeltin in his new realizations. Surrounded by the serene wooded area, there are no distractions and a quietness falls over the

sequence when Fruffeltin comes across the broken instruments. I could have depicted the children's book world in some sort of town or city, but found that the woods further delegated a sense of peacefulness Fruffeltin starts to feel when playing music with Daffodil. *Spirited Away* shows me how nature's essence can be closely tied to a character's purpose within a film and further demonstrates that the genre of fantasy not only lends itself for escapism but also for the re-contextualization of social issues. Sometimes if viewed from a fresh outlook, the viewer can pick up on such messages in a newly stimulating way.

III. Process:

Pre-Production:

Fruffeltin was animated in TVPaint, a program that aligns closely with hand-drawn animation on paper. Firstly I like the feel of hand-drawn animation for its nostalgic purposes, since it reminds me of early Disney films such as *Winnie the Pooh* and TV shows like *Tom & Jerry* that I watched growing up. Secondly I think this type of animation encourages a form of escapism through the line work and visual quality. The characters we see on screen still speak to us on a human level, as we try to relate to their struggles. Yet the way they and the world they find themselves in are rendered creates an obvious distinction between our own lived reality and what we see on screen. The images presented in front of us can then serve as a link to another world in which we can find ourselves on an adventure, crossing boundaries, meeting different personalities and sometimes even finding ourselves in the hero or villain role. 3D animation also offers a sense of escapism, but I think my personal ties to Studio Art reinforce my association with fantasy worlds to a drawing/painterly style. Keeping my intended audience of millennials in

mind for this film also informed my decision on choosing 2D animation, knowing millennials grew up with a plethora of 2D animated content.

When it comes to storytelling in *Fruffeltin*, I didn't want my personal experience to be shown transparently in the film. I was still trying to understand these anxiety behaviors myself and thought that by using elements to symbolize mental health struggles, I could feel comfortable enough to visualize them. Since I love fantasy, it was fun to figure out a way to tell a personal experience through creatures and robots.

First Idea Concept:

The original proposal centered on a lost friendship and a rekindling of that friendship between two individuals. In a way I incorporated that between Fruffeltin and Daffodil, but this was not intentional. I steered away from the original friendship idea because I felt like I was about to tell someone else's narrative with me projecting my feelings on their side of the story. This might be something to explore in the future; however, I couldn't quite make sense of how to make it work in four minutes. Instead with the new idea, the representations of Fruffeltin and the brothers play into the very nature of figuring out one's authentic self and forging a path that fits one's purpose. I felt more freedom when shaping the new idea around my purpose in trying to understand myself better and being more compassionate towards my own experiences.

Storyboards:

The storyboarding process helped me create clear shots and a structure with a distinct beginning, middle and end. The beginning mostly stayed the same, having the younger brother read the book as Fruffeltin performs different tricks to make him laugh. The ending still felt very unresolved and didn't come together until much later in the process. I knew that it was important

for me to visualize that as he continues to try and fulfil this role as a performer, he starts to lose himself only to discover in the end that his sense of well-being might be found elsewhere. Earlier versions of the ending had Fruffeltin returning to the book to find a sense of peacefulness in nature where one of his leaves grows back. The image of Fruffeltin sitting calmly among the birds and staring up at the sun with a serene smile was supposed to stand in direct contrast to the ruckus he created earlier. This felt right because I pictured him scaring away the birds in the beginning by bouncing the ball, so by having him recognize their beauty in a serene moment tied it back to his new found attitude. I was struggling with conveying this successfully and getting the point across about his intentions. By introducing the friend in the beginning whom he harms through his actions, the resolution in the end felt visually stronger. Instead of just looking up and seeing the birds, he actually had to fix something that he had broken in order to find a sense of peacefulness. Perhaps if I had shown his inner workings in a more abstract way throughout the film, cutting between the chaos in his head to his actions, and then showing it settle down when he is in nature, this connection with peacefulness to nature would have been stronger.

Two other major changes that occurred during the storyboarding process were Fruffeltin's first transition from the children's book to the video game world and the final battle scene. Originally I had Fruffeltin fly over to the television screen joyfully from start to finish with a balloon that he pulled out of his bag. Instead I chose to show his hesitation and then transition to him confidently walking over. He needed this kind of emotional transition to show that despite fear he felt strongly about his mission, even if motivated by the younger brother - the object of his attention. The balloon action would have made the moment too passive, losing Fruffeltin's main objective.

The change in the battle scene was motivated by both animation limits and climax issues. After losing his first two leaves through silly actions, I originally have him pull out a full set of armor from his bag that he puts on to then fight both robots. At this point I already had established that Timothy was amused by his downfall, and Fruffeltin is supposed to fight out of anger. Animating him in full armor worried me due to time constraints, but it also felt out of character. In addition, his magic bag had only been used up until this point to pull out silly gadgets. The armor and sword felt too serious, not like something he would muster up. By eliminating the armor/sword, maintaining Fruffeltin's faith in Timothy (the younger brother), and then having Timothy's robot be the one to sever his last leaf, a stronger build-up was achieved.

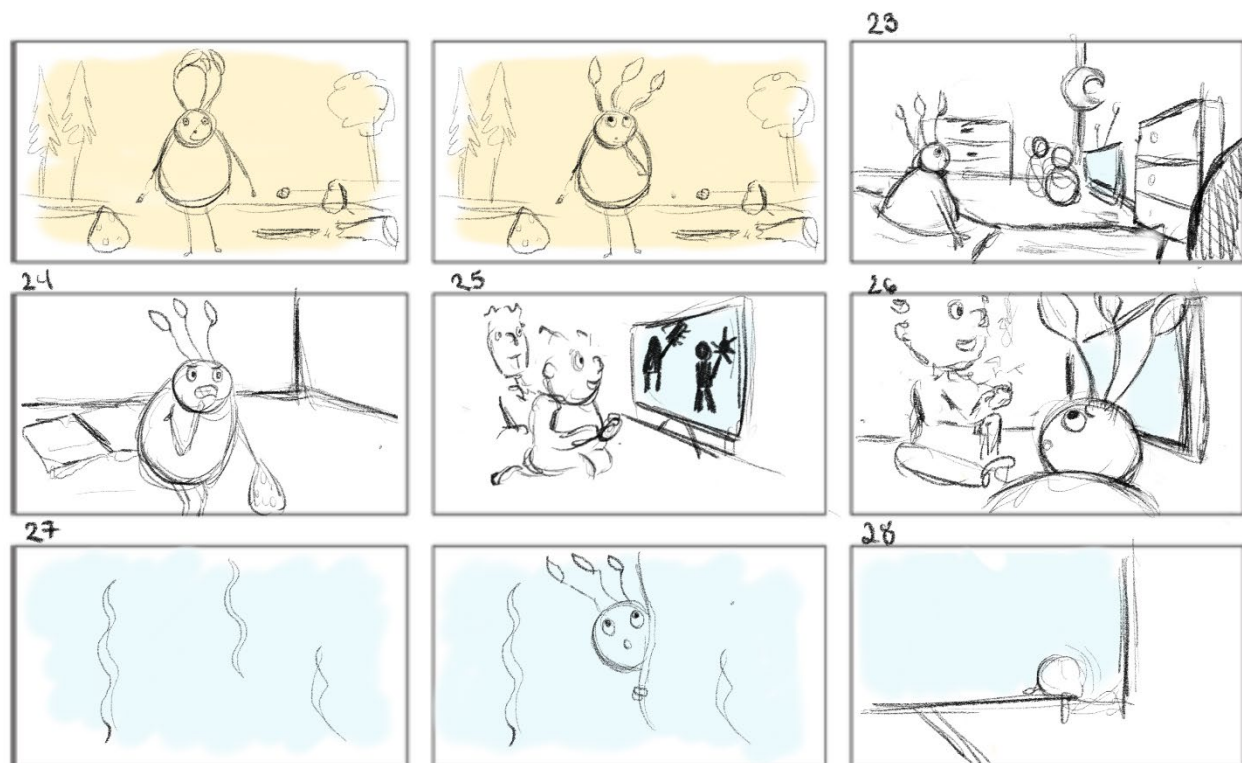


Fig. 1. Storyboard: Fruffeltin transitions to the Video Game World

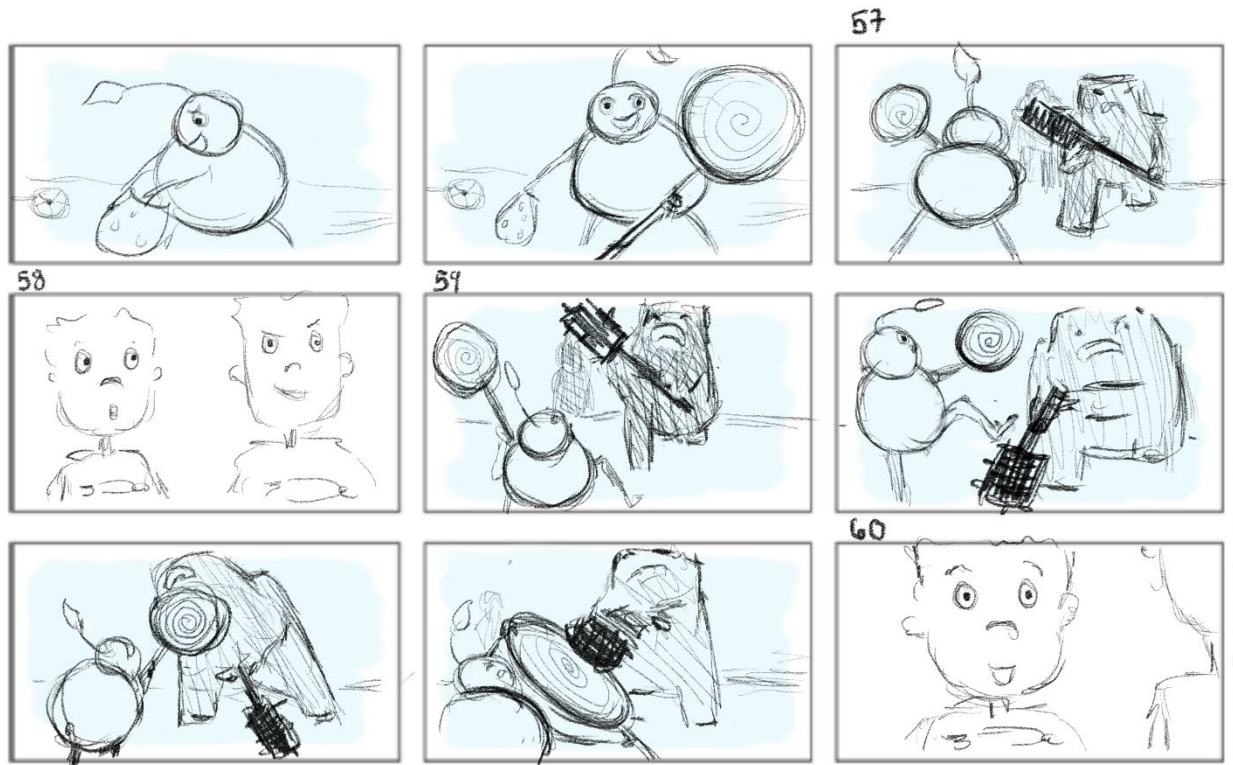


Fig. 2. Storyboard: Final Battle

Character Designs and Background Art:

The focus on character animation steered me towards keeping the protagonist simple yet interesting. Fruffeltin is defined by his round features, lanky limbs and overall warm colors. I characterize him as approachable, with his friendly and innocent demeanor. Fruffeltin's role, similar to a circus performer, stems from the facade-like nature in people-pleasing to avoid your own thoughts and feelings. He doesn't mind going to extremes even if it makes him look goofy, because the attention fulfills a part in him that feels empty. Some earlier designs of Fruffeltin felt a bit creepy, so I adjusted his face to look cuter: The eyes became bigger and rounder, with the pupils filling more of the white in his eyes. Keeping the eyes smaller on his overall roundish face made them look more adult-like, and I think combined with his circus-like aesthetic brought up an uneasiness that I was not going for. Besides giving him distinctive green leaves on his head, I

gave him three-toed feet, with the intention of repeating round shapes and adding to his quirkiness. Additionally, I wanted to add two buttons on his belly, but due to time constraints decided to eliminate those from his overall design. The buttons were supposed to hint at him wearing a kind of body-suit, parallel to those full-body outfits that clowns usually wear. Before I had fixed his facial features and decided on his buttons, I knew that the three leaves on his head would play an integral role narratively. In early designs the leaves were tear-drop shaped and attached to long thin strings. I eliminated the strings and made the leaves more voluminous to again flesh out the round shape language. I also thought that by filling up his head with the leaves, his baldness in the end would stand out even more. An added bonus was having a flowing movement from the leaves as Fruffeltin acts out his scenes, providing more liveliness to his character.



Fig. 3. Fruffeltin, Multiple Designs

I also experimented with color and shape before deciding on final features. In all these versions I wanted to communicate his quirkiness. Roundness is a common theme and it was fun seeing how I could push it in different directions. With the purple version of him for example (image above, top right corner), his body shape resembles more that of his friend Daffodil, and the overall color scheme would have conflicted with the video game world. The bottom right

version resembles the final design - the only major change was making the leaves on his head more voluminous.

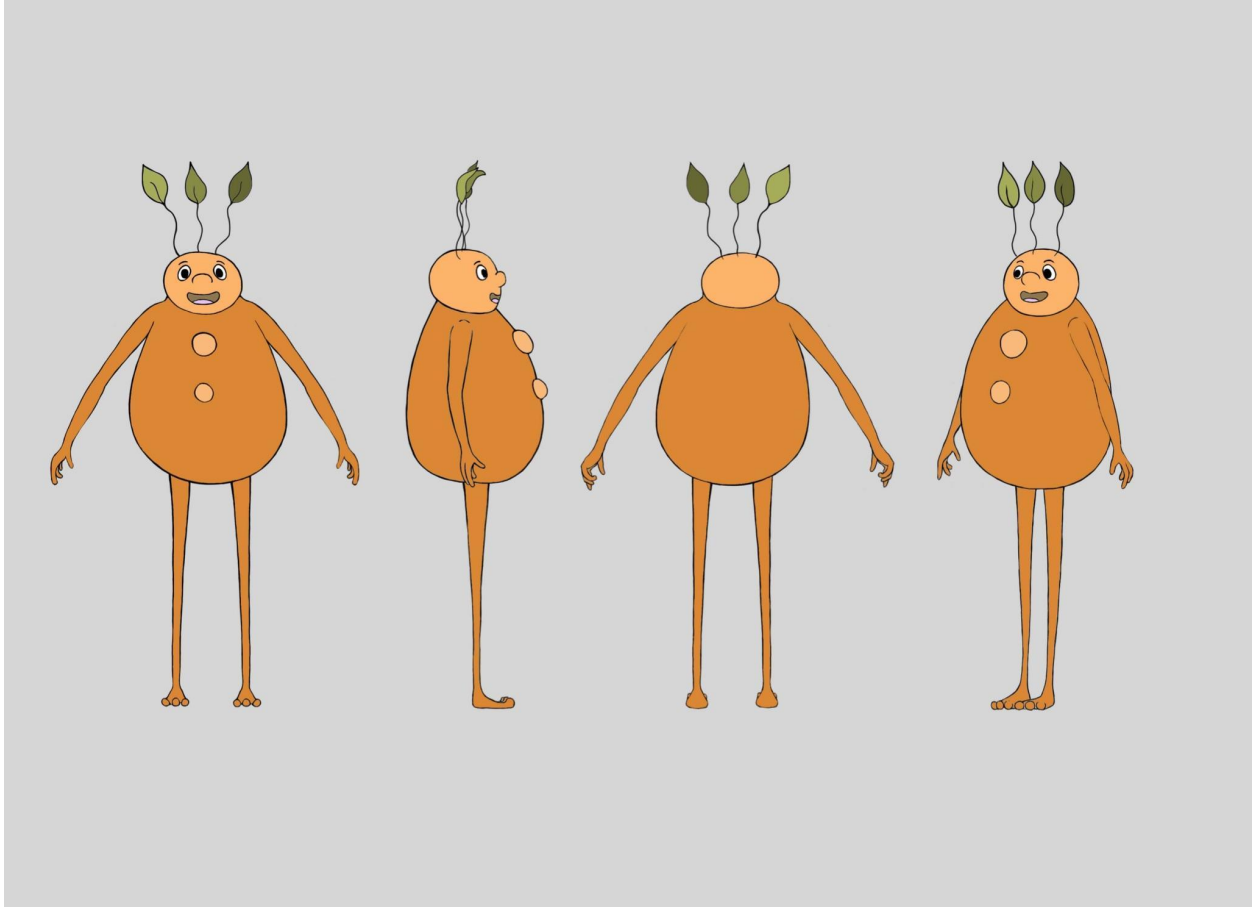


Fig. 4. Fruffeltin, Character Design Version 2

Fruffeltin's friend, Daffodil, embodies a similar roundness. The faded light yellow of Daffodil's character design goes with Fruffeltin's color palette but is more

subdued to draw less focus.



Fig. 5. Daffodil with Instrument, Scene from Film

The designs for the brothers were simplified even more and also rendered in subdued colors. I made sure to convey their age difference through varying proportions in face and body structure, but other than that the only other defining feature is their blue and green colored t-shirt, with Jeffrey's blue shirt standing as a complementary color to Fruffeltin's orangeness.

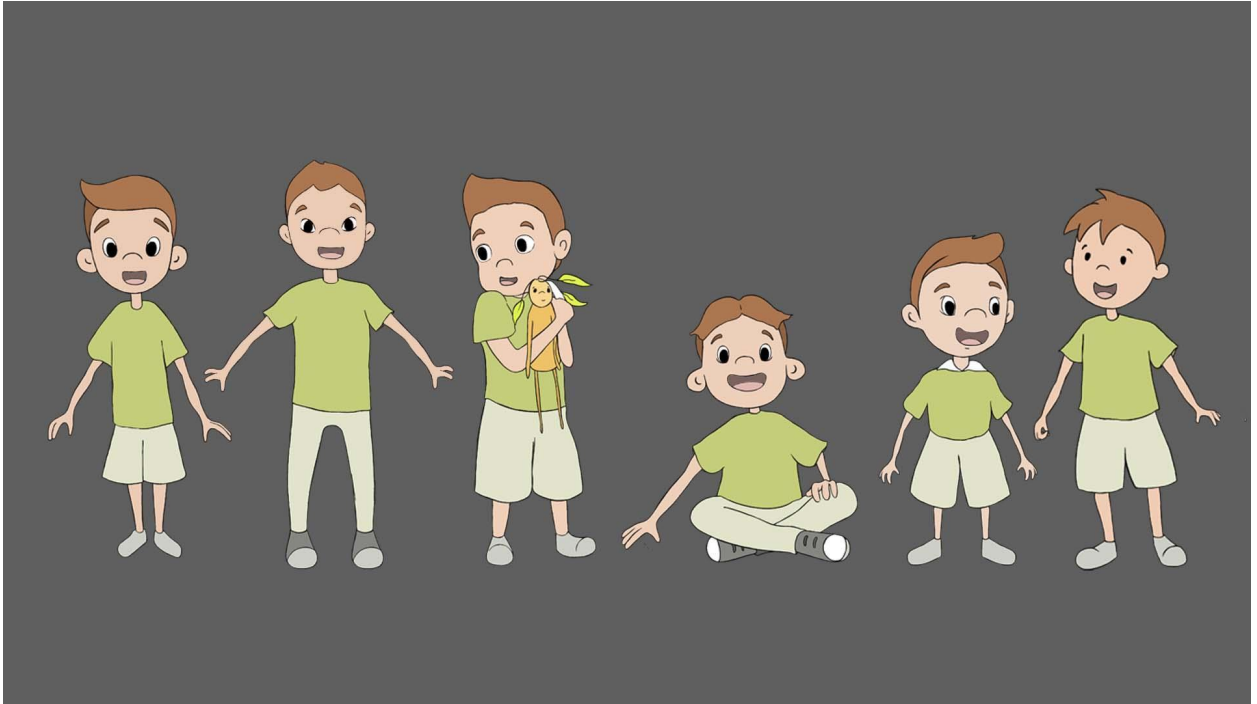


Fig. 6. Character Design: Timothy, younger brother

The design on the far right from the image above was chosen due to the simplicity of the eyes. I thought that Timothy would stand out more if I gave him expressive eyes, like I did with Fruffeltin. This was an attempt to distinguish the main character from the supporting character. This is not to say that main characters can't have simplistic features, like the protagonist in *Boy and the World*. But by incorporating both styles, one visually stands out automatically even more.

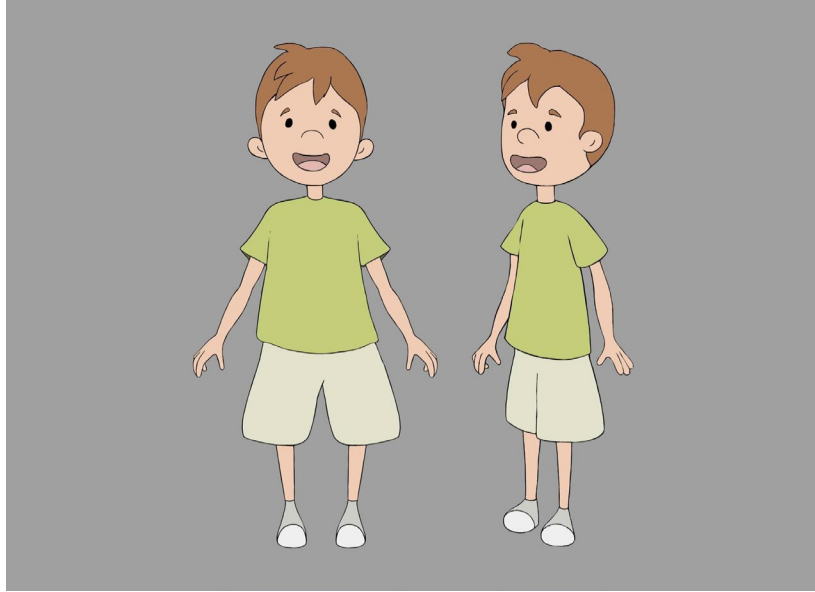


Fig. 7. Character Poses: Timothy, younger brother

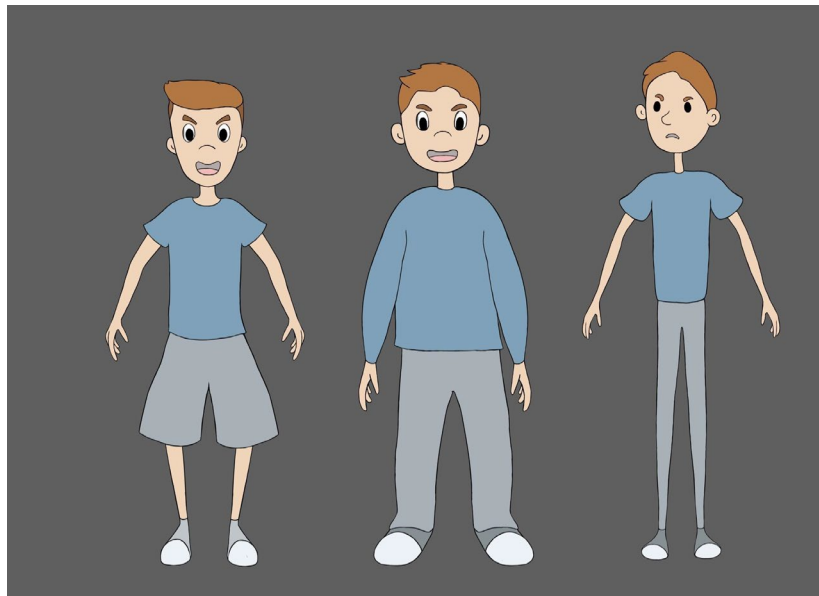


Fig. 8. Character Design: Jeffrey, older brother

The robot designs were created with simplistic geometric type shapes in mind. Jeffrey's robot is designed to be larger in stature with a more intimidating look, while Timothy's robot is smaller with a more innocent expression. When I thought about their movement, I needed it to be

possible to animate in the amount of time given to complete the thesis film. I thought that by giving the robots a hovering presence I wouldn't have to worry about any walking motion.

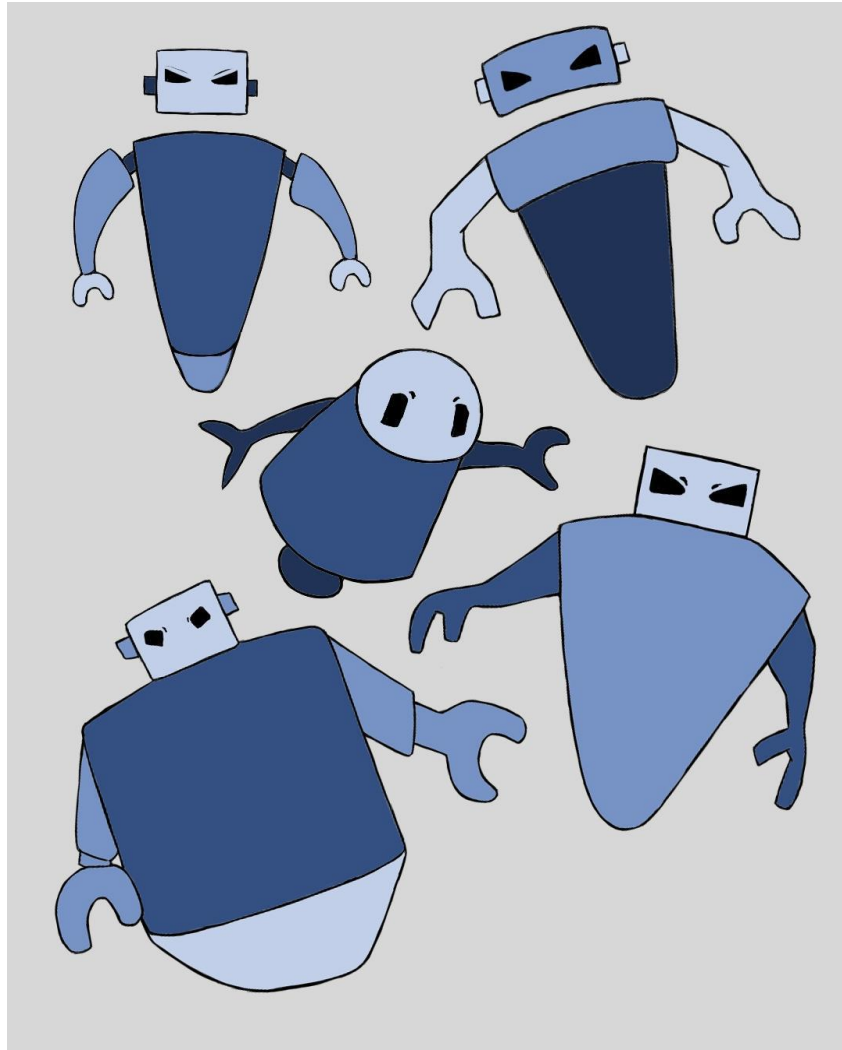


Fig. 9. Robot Designs: (middle) Timothy's final design, (bottom left) Jeffrey's final design

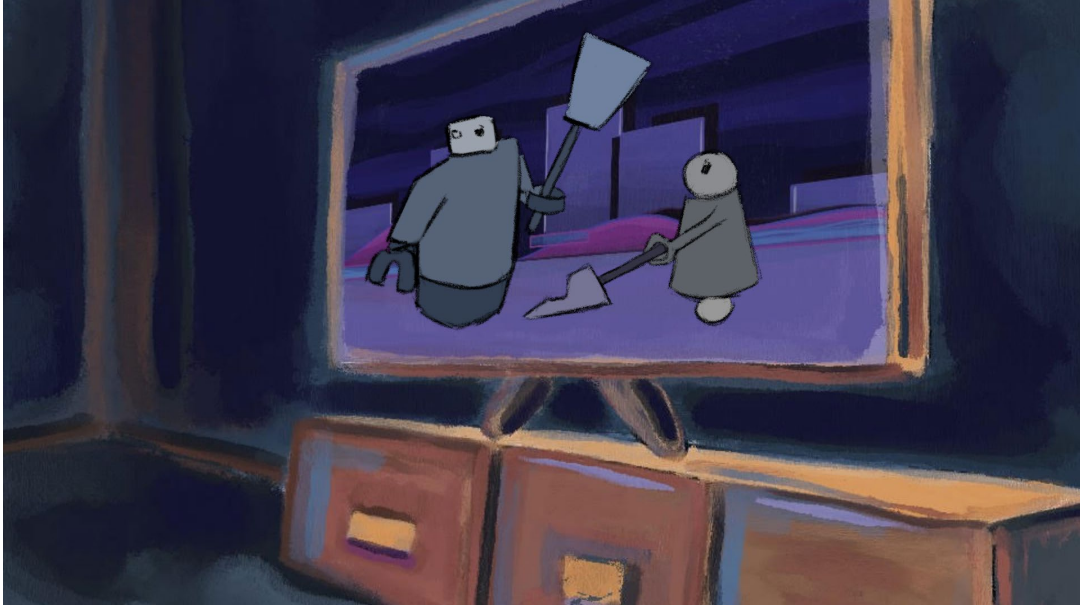


Fig. 10. Scene from Film: *Robots Fighting*

I created three different worlds in this film: the children's book, the kid's room and *Robot Battles*, the video game. It became important to establish each world in a distinctive style while still maintaining a cohesive film overall. The children's book world channels peacefulness through a toned down watercolor look. I wanted it to look warm and welcoming, something a child would like. The way I first envisioned this world was in bolder and brighter colors. I was looking at Dr. Seuss books and admired how color was used in such a precise and meaningful way, still conveying a kind of boldness throughout without taking away from the illustrations. For my early designs, I chose bold and bright colors, trying to keep simplicity in the shapes. It felt too overwhelming. It didn't resemble Dr. Seuss's work and instead relished in hyper-intense colors. Not only did I think the characters would get lost in this environment, but the feeling I wanted to create for the ending didn't sit right in this flashy landscape. Instead I switched over to the watercolor look, recalling several children's books such as *Peter Rabbit* by Beatrix Potter

that utilized this art style as well. The woods I digitally painted felt softer, giving the characters a prominent stage while still providing a believable space for them to live in.



Fig. 11. Background: Children's Book, Version 1



Fig. 12. Background: Children's Book, Version 2



Fig. 13. Background: Children's Book, Final Version

The kid's room, or the in-between world, transitions the happy children's book to the futuristic robot world. For this space I wanted to incorporate both color palettes. There are softer colors in some of the toys and the light, but the shadows, especially in the corner with the television screen, become much darker. When thinking about the younger brother, Timothy, his movement from the brightest spot in the room to the darkest corner, becomes reflective of his older brother's influence on him, and his own change in interest that comes with age.



Fig. 14. Background: Kid's Room, Close-Up

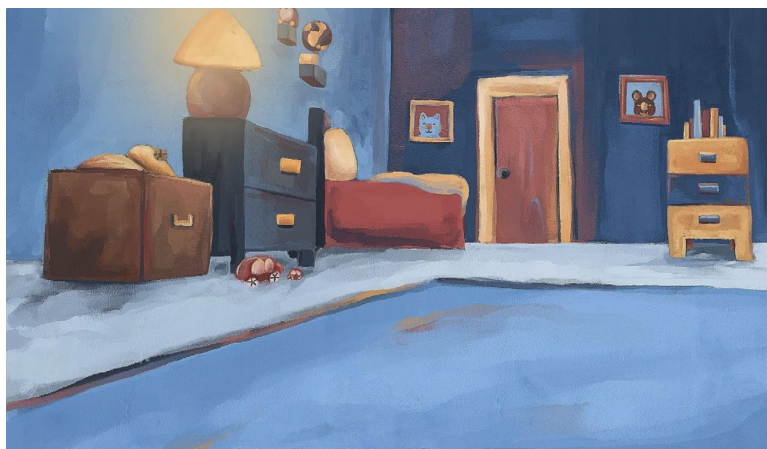


Fig. 15. Background: Kid's Room, New Angle



Fig. 16. Background: Kid's Room, Corner View

As a transitional space, the kid's room leads to the video game world, which is given a futuristic look, enveloped in purple/blue tones and geometric shapes. Fitting Fruffeltin into this world visually was done in post-production, providing an extra layer of purple light across the frame and giving the characters some highlights on their bodies from the light around them. I intended Fruffeltin to stand out as the goofy creature among robots, but finding a way to still make him belong to it visually became important from an artistic standpoint.

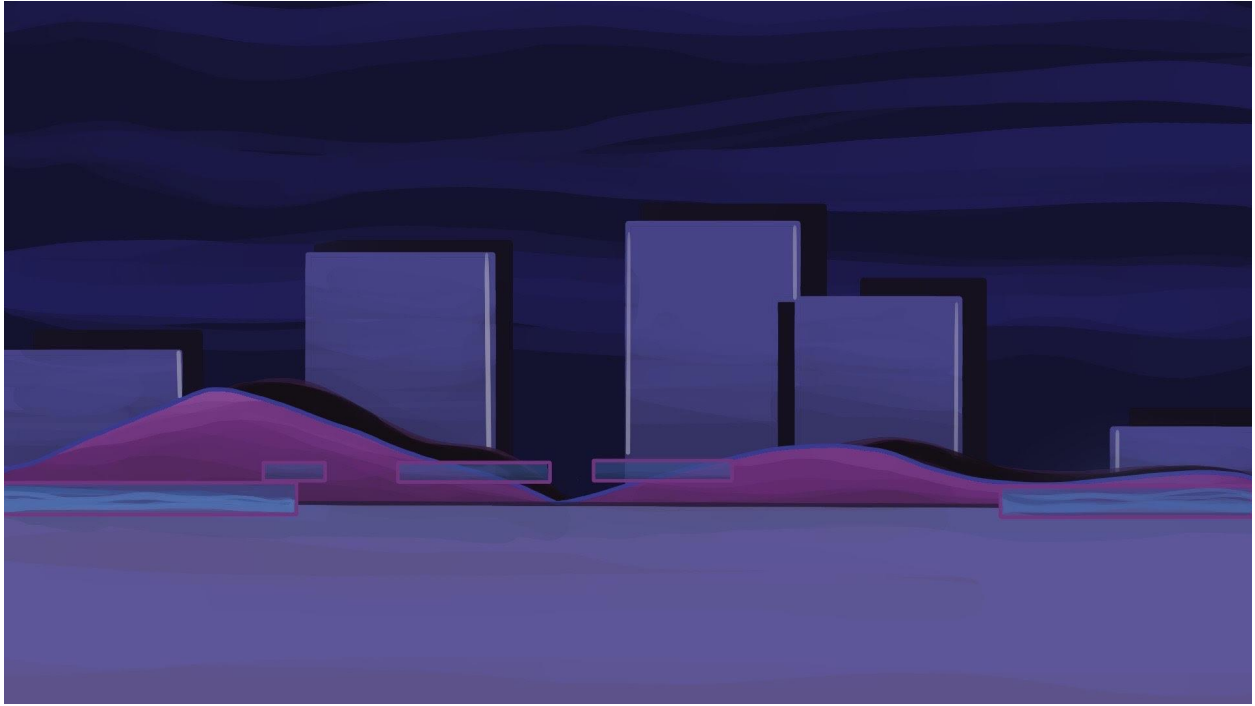


Fig. 17. Background: Video Game World, Main View



Fig. 18. Background: Video Game World, View with Kids

Production:

Animatic:

The animatic reinforced the question: *Is there enough time to convey this narrative in a meaningful way?* I was able to cut down on unnecessary actions and test out the ending to see how it played out in real-time. The timings for the first two leaf-cuts stayed similar to each other, having Fruffeltin continue his tricks as Jeffrey's robot interferes. The third leaf-cut required a different kind of timing, since this is the moment where Timothy makes a decision that changes Fruffeltin's course of action. There is more of a build-up between Timothy's robot slowly approaching with his weapon raised, and Fruffeltin looking up towards him with a glimmer of hope in his eyes. I remember in the early stages of the animatic these moments were happening too quickly, so by giving them an appropriate length of time the flow was realized more effectively.

After Timothy severs Fruffeltin's last leaf and both brothers laugh together, I made it a point to slow everything down. Fruffeltin is no longer rushing to perform his tricks. His somber nature correlates with the longer shots of him coming out to the television screen and walking back through the children's book with his head tilted down. It's a kind of depression that takes over when he realizes that he will not get Timothy's attention the same way as he did before, providing a clear change in mood that the animatic allowed me to actualize. Even after some of these major adjustments, I wondered if there could have been more time given in showing Fruffeltin's fear before confronting Daffodil, for this is a defining moment in the story. Although that might have been a missed opportunity, I was able to reshape Fruffeltin's personality in other areas where his actions felt out of character during the animatic stage. For example in shot 59, he

was originally portrayed as being angry when pulling out a tomato to throw at Jeffrey's robot. It was changed to a goofier reaction to align with who he is. By having him stick out his tongue at a dangerous robot, it shows his coping mechanisms when faced with a scary situation. There is no plan beyond the tomato throw; he might not even be thinking about the robot approaching next. Somehow he hopes this action will solve the problem so that he can go back to performing his tricks. Although throwing the tomato seems like a funny gesture to have his way, it doesn't outweigh the consequences to come.



Fig. 19. Scene from Film: Tomato Throw



Fig. 20. Animatic: Fruffeltin Prepares for First Trick



Fig. 21. Animatic: Fruffeltin Seeks Reassurance from Timothy (Scene 51)

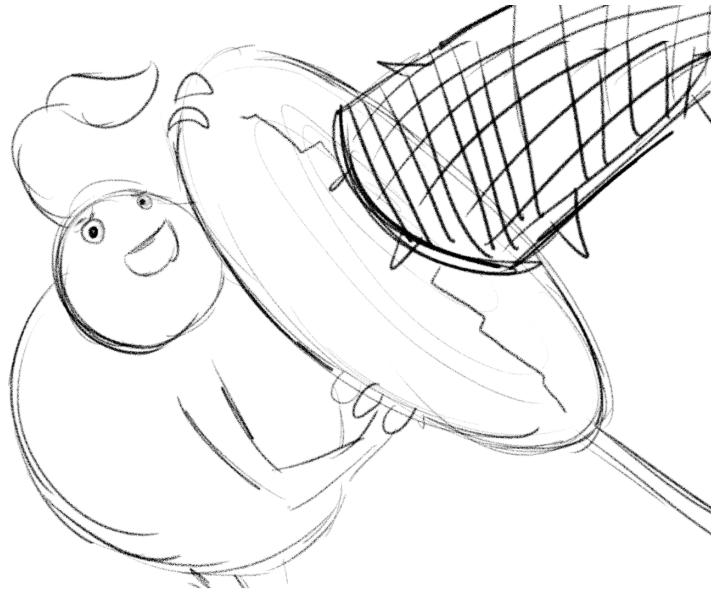


Fig. 22. Animatic: Fruffeltin's Last Leaf (Scene 66)

Animation:

During the animation process, I tackled some of the harder shots first, mostly concerning robot sequences or active Fruffeltin movements, and then worked in chronological order. With Fruffeltin's character I tried to determine moments of anticipation, squash & stretch as well as secondary motion, all which could have been pushed even further. There was room for stronger character performance throughout, especially when Fruffeltin is contemplating his decision to go into the video game, his reaction following each leaf incident, and his engagement with Daffodil in the end. I was able to sense the basic actions needed to convey the emotion, but think that exaggeration would have been a key tool in making everything feel more dynamic. It would have also made sense given Fruffeltin's circus-like persona, and could have provided an even greater contrast to his more inward-seeking behavior after losing his leaves. That being said, the rough animation phase allowed for experimentation, and I was able to test out various poses and

staging for the characters. Fruffeltin's leaves became a source of continuous movement throughout the film and his round design lent itself to some fun animation. With the brothers I kept it very limited, staging them mostly as reactors of the situation in front of them. This made it more important to vary the camera on them, thinking about when to have a close-up, or when to focus on both of the brothers in the same shot.

Below I will provide a walk-through of several key moments imperative to the narrative, revealing my intentions behind the animation itself as well as the symbolic references found throughout.

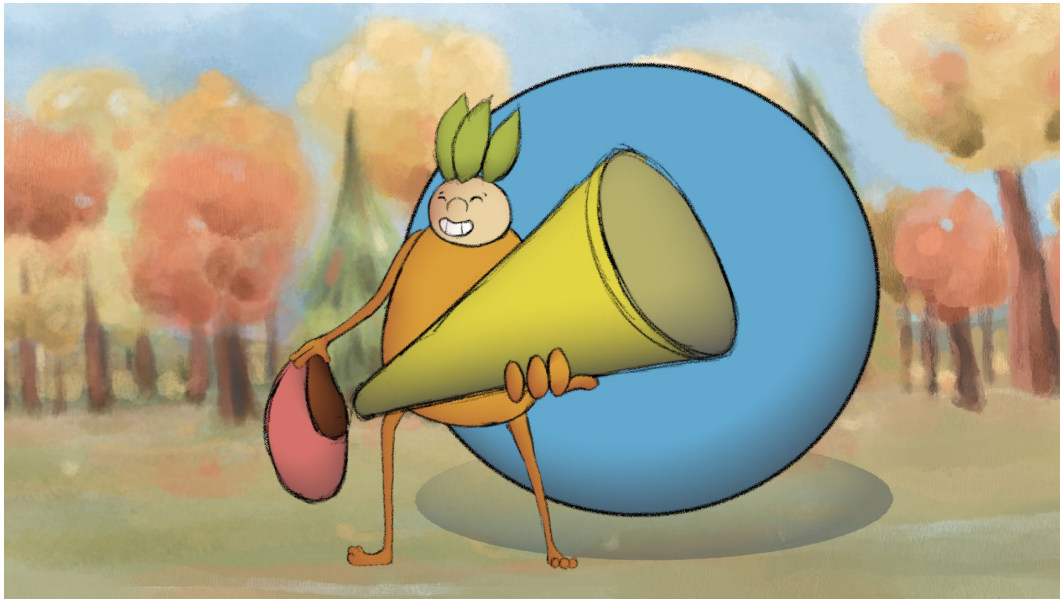


Fig. 23. Scene from Film: Introducing the Trumpet (Scene 6)

Shot 6 and the moments leading up to it, set up Fruffeltin's role as a performer, or the people-pleaser. He is excited, there is no sign of him wanting to do anything else as he proudly holds the trumpet out, anticipating Timothy's reaction. The trumpet becomes enlarged as he holds it close to the screen - he is really trying to impress Timothy by putting on a show. His

mentality would echo *the bigger, the better*. I cut between Timothy and Fruffeltin in the beginning scenes to inform the viewer of their relationship - how Timothy's engagement drives Fruffeltin's actions. Timothy's role as the child who is easily entertained makes it an attainable venture for Fruffeltin to receive this kind of acknowledgment.

To solidify Fruffeltin's mentality meant animating him center stage with a big grin, accompanied by the protruding arm with trumpet, and framed by the large blue ball. Having the big ball behind him gives him confidence - the stage is being filled up with distractions. The bag of tricks he holds perpetuates his behavior, giving him a seemingly limitless supply of gadgets that can help him act out his performance. Without the bag of tricks he would feel lost in this moment.



Fig. 24. Scene from Film: *The Shrug* (Scene 25)

Fruffeltin's ego overshadows his friendship with Daffodil because after running his friend over, Fruffeltin doesn't think he is at fault. He is more concerned about what caused him to fall, instead of why Daffodil is leaving the scene. Having Daffodil become smaller in the frame, as he disappears in the woods, mirrors him fading from Fruffeltin's consciousness. He looks Daffodil's way for a moment but with a quick shoulder shrug moves on, picks up the bag (his safety net) and looks for the one person he thinks can give him validation, Timothy.

From personal experience, when you are occupied by what motivates your anxiety, you can overlook those who actually care about you the most. Fruffeltin doesn't chase Daffodil's approval, most likely because this character doesn't respond in awe to Fruffeltin's performance. Daffodil seeks to connect with Fruffeltin on a different level by approaching quietly with his own instrument. This quiet approach gets him run over, for Fruffeltin needs immediate and direct approval; anything else is overlooked.



Fig. 25. Scene from Film: The Decision (Scene 32)



Fig. 26. Scene from Film: The Decision (Scene 34)

The switch from fear to confidence in shots 32 to 34 intends to show how strongly Fruffeltin feels about his mission. He is willing to leave in order to make Timothy laugh elsewhere, even if it is an unfamiliar environment. While taking a risk into the unknown can be really rewarding, his intentions to seek reassurance from Timothy make it more dangerous. The staging here informs his predicament: there's the book (a kind of safe-haven) on one side, which he glances back at for familiarity; furthermore he is intently looking towards the television screen out of frame.

There are some changes I wish I had made during these moments regarding character performance. I think his whole body could have been cowering more in shot 32, when he is afraid of going ahead. His thinking process is communicated by the pause, during which the fear is supposed to lift, but it happens too quickly without anything prompting it. Showing a few more moments of looking back and forth between the book and the television screen, and having him take a deep breath after it stresses him out, could have served as a more believable transition to the confidence he expresses next.

Fruffeltin's transition here relates to a big part of OCD recovery, which is doing exposures, or engaging in any situation that triggers your OCD (Greymond 1:06). With

Fruffeltin's decision I am showing him moving away from recovery, since he is exposing himself to something scary that is not part of his normal daily routine. Ali Greymond, the host of *OCD Recovery*, stresses that exposures should be reflective of your normal daily habits, and doing something out of the ordinary to expose yourself to can actually be counterproductive. Greymond gives a simple example by saying that a tv show you normally watch could function as an exposure, and advises against watching something extremely scary as a potential exposure (Greymond 7:56). In Fruffeltin's case, I could see him dealing with Timothy's absence in the children's book as a healthier exposure. His daily routine is defined by making Timothy laugh - without it he actually has to come to terms with the discomfort of the situation, instead of placing himself in a potentially dangerous environment represented by the video game world. Greymond also states: "In terms of compulsions, (when) you prevent yourself from feeling fear in one situation, it comes up with another" (Greymond 4:20). This is reflective of Fruffeltin after he enters the video game. He has forced himself to go, pushing away an initial fear, which only leads to a growing fear in losing Timothy's attention with each desperate performance.



Fig. 27. Scene from Film: Balancing Act (Scene 53)

Fruffeltin's initial dismissal of the robots mirrors the oblivious nature of being blinded by your anxiety. When caught up in your own anxious thoughts, you can easily become more unaware of your surroundings, oftentimes leading to a state of dissociation - when you don't feel grounded in reality anymore. When I forced myself to smile to be perceived as an outgoing positive person to everyone, I could easily make more mistakes and feel out of control. Usually not until something knocked me out of it, like a person's judgment or a mistake I made, was I forced to confront my actual feelings that were being bottled up.

Superimposing Fruffeltin towards the camera in shot 53 gave me the chance to demonstrate how much he needs to be the center of attention. He has boosted himself up to an extraordinary height, and fills the whole frame with a juggling act. When Jeffrey's robot strikes down one of his stilts, his wobbling uncertainty becomes center stage instead of the juggling act he proudly performed prior. For a moment he is jolted out of his performance cycle, and is

reminded again of the robots, whom he was distancing himself from. I animate his frightened expression while he desperately tries to find balance - he swings back and forth before trying to hold himself steady at his feet. Furffeltin's true feelings emerge, and his performer persona is beginning to fade.

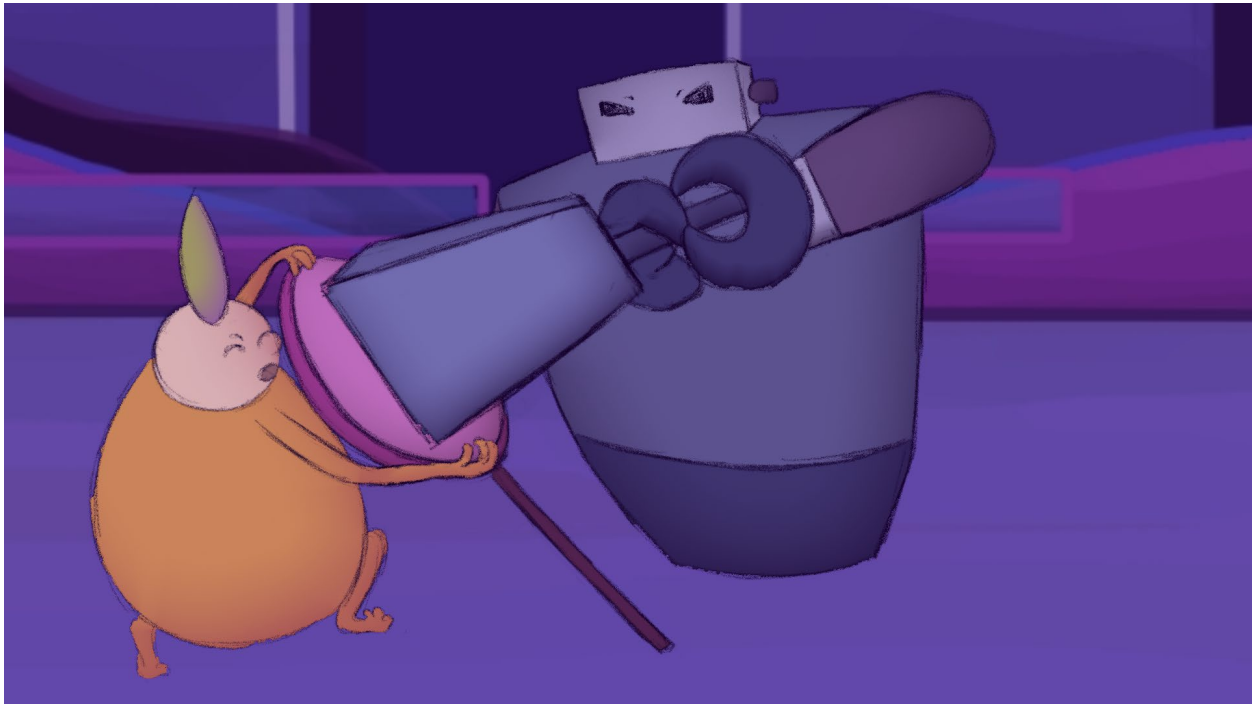


Fig. 28. Scene from Film: Battle (Scene 63)

The battle sequence is meant to stage the conflict in an obvious way, showing Fruffeltin's disadvantage. He grips the lollipop awkwardly and uses the only weapon he could muster as a shield after a short-lived attempt to push the robot away. This motion demonstrates that he is still fighting to be either part of this world or to remove the only obstacle in the way between him and Timothy, but he does so to no avail.

The correlation here between the animation and mental health can be found in the notion of trying to force your uncomfortable thoughts and feelings out of the way. It gets worse as a result and can lead to a breaking point. Fruffeltin is trying hard to fight this, but his weapon doesn't lend itself to combatting what he is facing. Perhaps because there is no "weapon" to force his fears away.



Fig. 29. Scene from Film: Last Hope (Scene 66)

Shot 66 highlights Fruffeltin's faith in Timothy. So far he has only had to contend with Jeffrey's robot - there hasn't really been a sign for Fruffeltin to foresee Timothy's betrayal. In comparison to Fruffeltin's expression here, I cut to a scene showing Timothy's contemplation as he watches the action unfold on screen. He takes a moment to look down at his controller: He hasn't made up his mind yet on how to act next, leaving the following action as more of a surprise to both Fruffeltin and the viewer.

A visual indication for the climax can be seen in the cracking of the lollipop, which grows bigger with each weapon hit received. Fruffeltin's overjoyed expression echoes his hope of being rescued in a seemingly losing battle. I angled the shot so that Timothy's view would correlate with Fruffeltin's eye level, not revealing Timothy's expression in any way and only giving the viewer Fruffeltin's emotion to elucidate.

Fruffeltin's mentality towards Timothy imitates the practice of reassurance-seeking, a common pattern of thinking one falls into when dealing with OCD thoughts. Pizey describes this in his podcast as a common compulsion defined by the excessive need to check in with someone over and over again to make sure everything is okay, in order to lower one's own anxiety (Pizey 2:00). With Fruffeltin I shaped this mental complexity in him seeking reassurance from someone else to confirm a sense of worthiness in the midst of uncomfortable thoughts and feelings, further perpetuating his unhealthy behaviors. For example, Fruffeltin looks up towards Timothy after each trick to make sure that Timothy is giving him a joyous response. Only this response incites Fruffeltin's obsession to check with Timothy that who he is and what he is doing is "good" or acceptable. Once Timothy stops reassuring Fruffeltin for his behaviors, it's a jarring change for Fruffeltin that knocks him out of the cycle, leaving him confronted by previously-buried feelings of confusion and sadness.



Fig. 30. Scene from Film: Finding the Instruments (Scene 78)

After returning to the children's book world, a place he has only really known in terms of Timothy's expectations, he stumbles upon his broken instrument, picks it up and doesn't quite know what to do with it. I then switched over to a wider shot that reveals Daffodil's broken instrument, from which he then gets the idea to fix them. Fruffeltin's motions again are kept simple and slow. He is taking his time processing the damage that was caused earlier through his actions.

When it comes to comprehending one's own past behaviors influenced by anxiety and OCD, feelings of shame can cloud your progress forward. Here, even though Fruffeltin feels ashamed of his actions, he is able to recognize what is important to him and attempts to mend something he thinks might be lost - his friendship with Daffodil. When I look back at things I have said or done in response to anxiety or OCD, I cringe or want a redo. But sometimes all one can do is move forward and create new memories guided by a conscious effort for connection.



Fig. 31. Scene from Film: Approach (Scene 80)



Fig. 32. Scene from Film: Peace Offering (Scene 83)



Fig. 33. Scene from Film: Ending Concert (Scene 86)

Establishing a moment of tranquility is how I intended on ending the film all along, and finding a way to do so through this depiction of friendship has felt rewarding. Fruffeltin is playing his trumpet in a different state of mind. He is sitting down in nature, his eyes are closed and he is performing with someone else, no longer needing to be center-stage. Their companionship calls to a new beginning and leaves the film on an open-ended note regarding Fruffeltin's mental health. I depict one leaf growing back, symbolizing that his identity is not lost, but also that he isn't going to be the same as he was before.

Music and Sound Design:

Music has the ability to elevate a story by highlighting emotional moments. I worked closely with my composer Nicolas Stackhouse, knowing that he has a keen ear for emotionally-driven music as well as whimsical melodies. I walked him through all the major emotional arcs



Fig. 34. Music Title Card

in the story, telling him about Fruffeltin's intentions as well as the tone of the different worlds he finds himself in. In the beginning Fruffeltin is accompanied by a whimsical glockenspiel-type instrument and the little trumpet beats make for a rather happy composition. At this point the viewer doesn't know that something is wrong - it's a lighthearted introduction to this character's personality. When Timothy drops the book, there is a switch that occurs from the lighthearted instrumentation to a more ominous sound, reflecting Fruffeltin's confusion. The ominous sound continues up until he enters the television screen, giving time for Fruffeltin to contemplate a

decision that is uncomfortable to him, but that he is willing to make anyways. The music in the video game world is epic, everything feels more intense: the stakes are high. Here it was important to have those trumpet sounds that were introduced earlier accompany Fruffeltin's actions, with the epic nature of the overall composition continuing. I find that these two juxtaposing sounds that work beautifully together give a musical interpretation of a goofy children's book character in a fighting video game. Once the actions in the video game world play out and a somber Fruffeltin heads back, the original happy glockenspiel melody becomes reversed and now accompanies his depressed demeanor. This felt powerful because it ties back to the beginning of the film, but the sad version emphasizes a major emotional change in the protagonist. There is no more facade, no more trying to make the child laugh. It's an uneasy sadness, because he hasn't acknowledged it before.

The idea for sound design came into place when the moments that included weapon hits needed to be intensified. They lacked a kind of power and with an audible booster gained a greater sense of importance. I worked with my sound designer Emily Pace, sharing with her the key moments in which I was looking to have sound, including the weapon clanging, the tomato throw, Fruffeltin getting hit on the head and the bouncing ball. I only asked to include sound design for these selective moments due to time constraints, but felt that they still added to the overall impact. Other moments that now, thinking back, could have also benefited from sound would be footsteps, rustling when his hand is in the bag, searching for a gadget, other hits from the robots and perhaps a mystical whooshing noise when he emerges from or into the children's book. Nicola's Stackhouse re-recording mixing helped blend the sound design and the musical composition in the end, and I felt satisfied with the outcome.

IV. Evaluation:

Through the weekly thesis meetings with Peter Murphey and the periodic committee meetings with Tom Gasek and Jonathan Seligson, I was able to complete the film to a satisfactory standard. The weekly meetings were essential in moving my progress along and making sure I was grasping all the necessary requirements to complete the film in time. I found myself staying more motivated after meetings, which were centered on in-depth discussions about character performance, scene set-ups, technical aspects and any other additional work required during the animation pipeline process. The notes I would receive from Peter on a weekly basis served as goals to work towards, and even if not reached fully due to time constraints, they taught me how to improve my work and to prioritize certain aspects over others.

When I received feedback from the other committee members, it was helpful having more of an outside perspective. Working so closely on a project can make one unaware at times of things that might not be working. It was also encouraging when the character's actions were understood and I felt that I could move on and complete work on another scene. Before thesis production went underway, I reflected back on why my prior short films hadn't met my desired expectations, and it all came down to having approached those projects through a panicked and perfectionist-oriented lens. When going into my thesis film production I prioritized patience and staying level-headed, even during the most stressful of times. Although I wish I could have pushed the animation to be more dynamic, the overall finished product is reflective of a carefully thought out timeline and a newly found awareness around my work habits. The thesis meetings played an integral role in maintaining these healthy work habits, because they kept me from getting sidetracked and falling in the traps of perfectionism.

I learned several valuable lessons during the process that now inform my future film-making. Below I describe three of the main lessons I learned that showcase how my film differs mostly from the initial proposal in aesthetic ambition and character performance. The first lesson I learned is that drawing out thumbnails before starting each action for a given scene would have helped me to determine stronger poses. I tested out my poses in TVPaint within the scene itself, but I found myself quickly feeling married to a certain pose. Thumbnails give me the chance to experiment, allowing me to stay loose in my drawing and to discover more interesting movements. The second lesson I learned is that without shooting reference footage, it's unnecessarily difficult at times to determine a character's believable movements. Since I am a visual learner, shooting my own reference footage could have acted as a guide, helping me to determine the basic movement and then giving room for potential exaggeration. The third lesson I learned is that including moving cameras throughout the film could have made the overall experience more engaging. There are certain scenes I have in mind, such as Fruffeltin riding on his unicycle towards the robots and Fruffeltin sliding down one of the stilts that could have benefited from a camera move following Fruffeltin in his action. This way, for example, the viewer would not be aware of the robot, until Fruffeltin rides into him, making for a greater build-up.

Audience Reaction:

A stand-out comment from the audience after screening was by Mark Reisch, who felt the story was going more along the lines of “Puff the Magic Dragon”, which implies the human child to be the protagonist of the story. He mentioned that perhaps having another child pick up the book in the end after Fruffeltin has returned and Timothy moved on, would have made more sense. It's a bit of a predicament I got myself into with the story. The brothers were designed to

play an integral role in getting Fruffeltin to his realization towards the end, but they weren't meant to be the main focus. If I had another younger sibling pick up the book, would Fruffeltin just fall back into his excessive people-pleasing habits? Or could I have found a way to make his new approach to make the child laugh less destructive by incorporating his friend in the tricks in the end instead of running him over? The set-up itself makes it complicated, the children's book character is supposed to entertain a child. I liked playing with the idea of interrupting the expectations that come with certain roles - how as people we are always expected to act put-together and positive on the outside. But what happens when that is interrupted? When we actually say "Well I am actually not fine at the moment"? This encouraged me to have Fruffeltin, the goofy children's book character, question his role, although I wish I could have elaborated more on this. That same concern over the protagonist was also pointed out during the beginning stages of the film, when I started my first shot with Timothy opening and reading the book. By introducing it with Fruffeltin coming into the screen instead, I thought this would help in setting up Fruffeltin as a protagonist.

Discovering something important about yourself is the main focus, but a younger person growing out of something is also implied - it's a discovery in itself. To me it was still an added bonus to have a commentary about a young kid moving on from something, especially when influenced by an older brother. If I had focused on this aspect, the film would have ended with Timothy playing the robot video game. I can see how it can be interpreted this way, especially since one of the human characters undergoes a change themselves.

V. Conclusion:

Mental health affects everything you do, from your personal life to your professional life. People deal with mental health issues in a variety of ways: I happen to use a creative platform to explore such complexities. I believe that sharing mental health experiences through allegorical storytelling alleviates shame associated with those experiences and acts as a tool of self-compassion. *Fruffeltin* to me is an OCD/anxiety story, labeled as such through my research, and given a symbolic undertone by way of specific characterizations. Depicting mental health issues through film proved itself challenging, for presenting a one-off solution to the problem lacks truth, and creating a personality for the character that is solely defined by their struggle becomes problematic.

Personal experience translated into art takes on a new dimension, one still grounded in sincerity but shaped in a newly imagined context. Consequently allegorical storytelling gave me the opportunity to embody my thought process through *Fruffeltin*'s character. Fleshing out a character like *Fruffeltin* helped me reflect on my own mannerisms, motivating me further to incorporate those in his actions. *Daffodil* became synonymous to those in my life I value deeply but felt myself becoming distant from due to mental health struggles, and the brothers both took on the role of the outsider, or the general public - those I felt I had to prove myself to be mentally stable and outwardly "normal" towards.

I felt a sense of freedom with this production, having choice in story, the characters' personalities, and any visual aspect involved. Being able to focus on one project for over a year proved itself to be beneficial, because there was time for exploration in character performance and world-building, fundamentally really getting a sense of what was working and what wasn't.

It gave me a foundation in animation that will only help with future productions; consequently, it strengthened my confidence in telling meaningful stories through the lens of fantasy. Watching it all unfold with every new step during the animation pipeline reaffirmed my original motivation, inviting me to create a flawed character whom you could be empathetic towards.

Acknowledgements:

I want to thank Peter Murphey, my thesis chair. Through his thoughtful and constructive feedback each week, I was able to finish the film at a standard I had hoped for. Having engaged in such valuable conversations with him encourages me to continuously seek out advice from professionals and keep an openness towards new perspectives. There is a lot to learn from Peter, and he felt like a mentor to me during this entire process.

Thank you to my Thesis Committee members, Thomas Gasek and Jonathan Seligson. Their insights helped me towards new and exciting realizations in my work.

I want to thank my composer and re-recording mixer Nicolas Stackhouse, whose valued expertise fused with my vision, created music that elevated the story. His ability to recognize the emotional weight of a scene and translate it into a breathtaking composition is remarkable.

Thank you to my sound designer Emily Pace and my colorists Ellehcyn Hallock, Logan Girdlestone, Isaac Feist and my mother Kim Ratzel.

VI. Appendix:

The appendix includes the artist statement, film credits and bibliography.

Artist Statement:

As early as I can remember, I have sought inspiration from stories based in fantastical worlds and characters who embody a kind of whimsy. I created this film because I wanted to tell a fantastical story with underlying themes pertaining to my own life. The story of Fruffeltin came to be by pondering about my own path forward in life as well as my growing understanding of my mental health. Fruffeltin's purpose as a children's book character first seems to be set in stone, to make the child happy. But as he continues to try and fulfil this role, he starts to lose himself, only to discover in the end that his sense of well-being might be found elsewhere. Simultaneously the younger brother's interest changes as he begins to prefer bonding with his older brother over Fruffeltin. These representations for me play into the very nature of figuring out your authentic self and forging a path that fits your purpose.

The story itself underwent several changes to aid in Fruffeltin's character development. The original concept entailed Fruffeltin returning to the book to find peace in his solitude, but this didn't quite fit my vision. By having him come to terms with the damage caused through his actions both to himself and to another, he was able to re-reconnect in a more meaningful way in the end and come to this new realization.

Overall I felt that this project gave me the chance to hone in on character animation and development, and trying to tell a meaningful story in a short format. Having drawn and painted all my life, 2D animation became an extension to my storytelling, and although the process itself is challenging, I hope to continuously see the magic behind it as well.

Fruffeltin

2D Animated Thesis Film

Jared Ratzel

For MFA in Film and Animation

School of Film and Animation

Rochester Institute of Technology, Rochester NY

March 2020



Peter Murphey

Digitally signed by
Peter Murphey
Date: 2020.04.03
10:01:57 -04'00'

Adviser: Peter Murphey

Logline:

A goofy children's book character leaves his book to enter a fighting video game in hopes of winning a child's affection back.

Treatment:

A young boy opens up a children's book titled *Fruffeltin*. He turns to a page on which the character Fruffeltin, a silly-looking creature with three colorful leaves on his head, pulls out cooking ingredients out of a round bag and bakes a tall awkward cake. The child smiles and turns to the next page, on which Fruffeltin navigates around trees, carrying the tipping cake, and in the process scaring away multiple birds and squirrels. The young boy chuckles and turns to the next page. Here Fruffeltin trips over his own feet, causing the cake to fly on a fellow creature's face. The boy laughs out loud. There is a knock on the boy's bedroom door and his older brother enters holding a video game. The young boy jumps off the bed and tosses the book to the side. The book lands on the ground, and the siblings begin to play the video game. Fruffeltin, who has previously been positioned upright on the book cover, now lays flat on his tummy. He gets up slowly, dazed and confused. He gazes over to where the siblings are playing. He angrily examines the television screen. Fruffeltin grabs his round bag and jumps out of the book. Outside of the book, with only his silhouette visible, he runs across the room and thrusts himself into the television screen.

In the video game, he finds himself in front of an enormous field on which several characters are fighting each other, all wearing armor and carrying swords. He glances behind him at the screen that he entered from, which shows the two siblings playing on the other side. He scoffs and pulls out a unicycle out of his bag. To make the child laugh, he rides the unicycle

in front of the fighters and waves at the child with a big smile. He is knocked over by one of the fighters and lands on his belly, causing one of his head leaves to rip off. The child laughs from the other side. Fruffeltin gets back up, shortly looks at the fallen leaf, but then smiles at the child. He pulls out a broken violin out of his bag and begins to play an off-tune song on the broken strings as he dances around. One of the fighters cuts the violin in half with his sword. Fruffeltin angrily takes a half of the broken violin and slaps the fighter with it. The fighter turns around and towers over Fruffeltin. He swings his sword at Fruffeltin, cutting off his second leaf. After the leaf flies away, Fruffeltin grabs his bag and dashes away, hiding behind a rock.

He breathes heavily, glances around the corner to look at the fighters, then at the child, who is cheering as he is playing. Fruffeltin grunts. He reaches his arm into his bag and pulls out a set of armor. He puts the armor on and clumsily heads to the field, holding a sword of his own. He attempts to swing it around but misses, while he dodges the other fighters. As he is swinging and dodging, his final leaf on his head begins to rip. He stops, drops his sword and tries to keep the leaf upright. A fighter approaches him, swings the sword at him, but Fruffeltin ducks down. The child is laughing again, the fighter keeps swinging at Fruffeltin, and Fruffeltin holds the leaf upright while crawling backwards on the ground away from the enemy. He makes it back to the rock, hides behind it, and holds on to the leaf. When he calms down his breathing and thinks the leaf is steady, he stands up with a proud smile. The leaf rips and falls to the ground.

Fruffeltin emerges from his hiding place, holding the last fallen leaf in his hand. He sees the other two leaves on the fighting field. He tries to retrieve the other two, but is pushed back by the fighters. The child laughs as Fruffeltin fails to get his leaves back. He looks at the child angrily and tosses the leaf he was holding on the ground. With the armor and leaves left behind,

he drags his bag as he walks, leaving the video game. After passing the child with a frown, he returns to his book, sits in the woods and sulks. A couple of squirrels climb on the trees. He raises his head and looks at them. Birds fly down and sit next to him. He smiles and leans towards them. He reaches out his hand and one of the birds sits on it, making him chuckle. The creature appears on which he has previously dropped the cake on. Fruffeltin smiles nervously, as the creature sits next to him. Birds are chirping and there is a slight breeze. The creature next to him is humming slightly and playfully moving its legs up and down. Fruffeltin smiles, closes his eyes and takes a deep breath. He pulls out his broken violin and begins to play a sweet, little off- tune song. One of his leaves grows back on his head in its infant state.

Rationale:

Living solely for others instead of prioritizing your own mental health can become damaging to one's own sense of identity. The reliance on others for validation uproots reality, thus jeopardizing a person's mental health. It becomes about recognizing the exhausting effects ambitious people pleasing has and then taking the necessary steps to take care of an anxious mind. In this film the main character, Fruffeltin, lives to please someone else and as a result begins to lose his identity, shown visually through the fallen leaves from his head. His constant efforts to make the child laugh are in hopes of receiving a sense of fulfillment. When in conflict with maintaining his identity or continuing to please the child, Fruffeltin makes the choice to return to his home, letting his sadness take over. The feeling is unpleasant yet by accepting it, he begins to find comfort in his own company.

This film is about going through the arduous journey of people-pleasing and ending with a sliver of hope that Fruffeltin will be okay. This ending does not secure his well-being as taken care of, but merely suggests that the step he took that day led to a moment of

reflection. Also, with this film I am not suggesting an ideal way to deal with this particular mental health dilemma, but an active possibility seen in the act of stepping away from a recognized toxicity and returning to a peaceful place that can further help sort out uncomfortable thoughts and feelings.

Vision:

As a 2D animated film, Fruffeltin will be a rather whimsical, even silly-looking creature, emphasizing his uniqueness but also reinforcing his perceived purpose in life to make the child laugh. He will stand in stark contrast to the fighters in the video game who are visually represented as tough and tall, as well as being identical to each other. Fruffeltin's long legs give him a bit of an awkward walk and he has the ability to smile largely, when responding to the child. The three leaves growing on his head are each a different color, whereas the entirety of his body is plainer in color. In regards to his surroundings, using the video game itself as a contrast to the children's book serves to give Fruffeltin a new environment to adjust to, one starkly different from his own.

For the style of animation I am inspired by films such as *The Boy and the World*, a film by Ale Abreu, and *Killing Time*, a short Goebblins film. Both of these films have a children's book-like aesthetic, which I want to evoke not only in the actual children's book represented in the film, but also in the surroundings when Fruffeltin leaves the book, as well as inside the video game. With this aesthetic I hope to exaggerate Fruffeltin's movements and keep the environment, and other characters, looser and not based too much in a style of realism. The two siblings are human, but are not going to be restricted to proper proportions, and while the fighters in the game will be more stern and heavy in their movement, their appearance will not deviate from the overall aesthetic I am envisioning.







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Special Thanks
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Jonathan Seligson

The background of the first slide is a soft, painterly illustration of a forest scene. In the center, two cartoon animals are depicted. On the left, a light-colored animal, possibly a rabbit or a small dog, is shown in profile, holding a large yellow megaphone with a blue ribbon tied around its middle. On the right, a darker-colored animal, possibly a cat or a small dog, is shown in profile, holding a pair of scissors. They appear to be standing on a path or clearing. The background features stylized trees with warm, autumnal colors like orange, yellow, and brown, and a hazy, light-colored sky.

Special Thanks
Animation Grad Class
family and friends

The background of the second slide is identical to the first slide, featuring the same soft, painterly illustration of two cartoon animals in a forest. The light-colored animal on the left holds a yellow megaphone, and the darker-colored animal on the right holds a pair of scissors. They are surrounded by stylized trees with warm, autumnal colors.

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
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School of Film and Animation,
Rochester Institute of Technology

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